

DEPARTMENT of the INTERIOR

FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE

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FEDERAL GOVERNMENT TO PAY COSTS OF FOREST FIRE IN MICHIGAN

The Interior Department will assume all direct costs associated with the 73,000 acre, two-month-old fire at the Seney National Wildlife Refuge in Michigan's central Upper Peninsula, Secretary Thomas S. Kleppe announced today while touring the site. These costs include reimbursement to Michigan's Department of Natural Resources for their firefighting efforts.

The fire, which was contained yesterday, is the worst ever on a national wildlife refuge and efforts to control it so far have cost an estimated \$4.4 million. Almost 1,100 people representing 24 States and a half dozen Federal agencies were involved in the control effort which was directed by the Boise Interagency Fire Center. Seven individuals were injured while fighting the fire, but none seriously.

"As of today the fire has blackened about 57,000 acres on the refuge and almost 16,000 acres in and around the Manistique State Forest. Very little private lands were burned and no buildings are known to be affected," Secretary Kleppe said.

The blaze began July 31 when a lightning strike sparked flames in a designated remote wilderness bog area of the refuge. Very dry weather, shifting winds, inaccessible terrain and a variety of fuels in the area hampered control efforts. Initial efforts to reach the fire on foot failed because most of the area was peat and bog country which is difficult to negotiate on foot, and impossible for heavy equipment.

Methods and equipment needed to extinguish one kind of fuel, for example, hardwood timber, were ineffective on another type such as peat bogs. The situation was further complicated by the fact that the peat continues to smolder underground after the surface fire is put out. This made it quite difficult for the firefighters since they would extinguish the fire in one area and sometimes find that it flared up again several days later. In fact, the fire was thought to be contained on September 8

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and demobilization was begun, but it flared up again September 12. It is possible that peat bogs in some of the contained areas of the refuge might continue to smolder until winter.

"The logistics, manpower, and skills necessary to control a fire of this magnitude resembled that of a military operation," Kleppe said. "Everyone involved, especially the Boise Interagency Fire Center and the Michigan's Department of Natural Resources, should be commended for their efforts."

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